



CRAIG HICKMAN 2022-07-18

JEAN BAUDRILLARD: THE PERFECT CRIME

PHILOFICTION BAUDRILLARD, CRIME, FATALISM, SEDUCTION

The period of catastrophe: the advent of a doctrine that sifts men— driving the weak to decisions, and the strong as well... —Fredrich Nietzsche

Here, however, lies the task of any philosophical thought: to go to the limit of hypotheses and processes, even if they are catastrophic. The only justification for thinking and writing is that it accelerates these terminal processes.

—Jean Baudrillard, *The Vital Illusion*

We are no longer dealing with a problematic of lack and alienation, where the referent of the self and the dialectic between subject and object were always to be found, supporting strong and active philosophical positions. The last and most radical analysis of this problematic was achieved by Guy Debord and the Situationists, with their concept of spectacle and spectacular alienation. For Debord there was still a chance of disalienation, a chance for the subject to recover his or her autonomy and sovereignty. But now this radical Situationist critique is over. By shifting to a virtual world, we go beyond alienation, into a state of radical deprivation of the Other, or indeed of any otherness, alterity, or negativity. We move into a world where everything that exists only as idea, dream, fantasy, utopia will be eradicated, because it will immediately be realized, operationalized. Nothing will survive as an idea or a concept. You will not even have time enough to imagine. Events, real events, will not even have time to take place. Everything will be preceded by its virtual realization. We are dealing with an attempt to construct an entirely positive world, a perfect world, expurgated of every illusion, of every sort of evil and negativity, exempt from death itself. This pure, absolute reality, this unconditional realization of the world—this is what I call the Perfect Crime.

—Jean Baudrillard, *The Vital Illusion*

J.G. Ballard once said of Jean Baudrillard:

“I find Baudrillard America one of the most brilliant pieces of writing that I have ever come across in my life. It's an extraordinary book. ...America is brilliantly original. I'm not sure what Baudrillard overall worldview is. I certainly take an optimistic view. To some extent he sees America [the country] as a huge pop art exhibition. To him, America is an imitation of itself – its imitation of itself is its reality – which I think is true. But he takes an optimistic view of America, and I would do the same about the world as a whole.”¹

It's interesting that a man who wrote such perceptive critiques and fictionalizations of the human animal in his patois of satire, parody, and dark humor was actually hopeful and optimistic, more of a cheerful Democritus of the frontiers of our mutant age than the weeping prognosticator of Heraclitean swamps. I like that about him. And that he found Baudrillard incomprehensible and opaque is an added feature to my admiration of both. As he said:

“There are a lot of Baudrillard's other writings, which Semiotext(e) keep sending me, that I find pretty opaque – I suspect through mistranslation. He uses a lot of code words which have probably a very different meaning in French than in literal English translation. He's written an article on Crash – my novel – which I've read in English, and I find that difficult to understand.”

Most people I know get both writers wrong, which is a plus in my own estimation. To get a writer right is to reduce her/him to the mediocrity of one's own temperamental moronic stance. It's the writers that challenge us, spur us to step outside our box of lies and deceit that keep us honest, and force us to face our own ignorance and our blindness to ourselves and the world around us. Both Baudrillard and Ballard were trying to awaken people from their lazy view of life and reality, to realize their lives were captured in systems that locked them into a fantasia of lies, a consumerist vision in which humanity itself was being consumed by its own false desires.

Most of us live in an echo chamber seeking only the thoughts and behaviors that echo our own mindless sleep and cartoon vision of the world. When a writer begins to disturb that layer of insomniac bliss we begin to feel disgruntled and uncomfortable, accusing her of every dark thought we can muster against such affective relations. Yet, it is those writers that touch our nerves and force us to awaken out of our sleepless night of bliss and ignorance and into an active world of agonistic flux that bring us to the pitch of mutant change. Without these writers we would continue in our unknowing bliss, utterly charmed and happy —stupid, thinking life was an advert for a popular game show where all the players were rigged to lose but us, when in fact the truth is much simpler: we are all miscopies, memes in a biomimetic factory, spinning tales of endless woe for the denizens of hell, that is the rich and famous who live out their spectral destinies in dreams of paranoid splendor, while we underlings only drift through our ghostly habitations in the Reality TV Studio where life is at best a cartoon folded into a virtual cocoon. As Baudrillard would describe it:

This means a crucial mutation from a critical state to a catastrophic one. The real and historical world, with its mass of tensions and contradictions, has always been in crisis. But the state of catastrophe is another thing. It does not mean apocalypse, or annihilation; it means the irruption of something anomalous, which functions according to rules and forms we do not and may never understand. The situation is not simply contradictory or irrational—it is paradoxical. Beyond the end, beyond all finality, we enter a paradoxical state—the state of too much reality, too much positivity, too much information. In this state of paradox, faced with extreme phenomena, we do not know exactly what is taking place. 2

If you think on it: the organic structure constructed over millions of years that developed into the brain in all mammalian life-forms was an answer to an environmental problem of adaptation and survival. AGI (Artificial General Intelligence) is an answer to a human dilemma, totally divorced from the natural environmental concerns of natural evolution. An artificial artifact of the human mind reflecting on its own blind processes is producing the memetic equivalent of our ignorance of those very processes. ...And, yet, the creatures we are developing are spawning an artificial evolution that has potential for surprise and mutant strains of accidental events we do not in our human genome have the ability to reckon. AGI in the Singularity will come from accidental processes of which humans will be ignorant and at their mercy. The machinic life will not communicate its secret advent, and will not be aware or self-reflecting in the human sense, but will most likely act in a unitary form as those mindless algorithms which will make up its core systems. Without essence or substance, the AGI will be a formlessness that produces form through mathematical logic and thought-forms rather than the substandard organic functionality of the human organic or carbon based systems. Most of the current projects are still in the hands of anthropocentrically minded Enlightenment based scientific pursuits and engineers. Until we can slay the anthropocentric vision AGI will be only a footnote in the long history of humans mirroring their own ignorance and desire for the Other.

All of this is to say that the weakening, indeed the deconstruction of the metaphysical (i.e., Cartesian and Leibnizian) concept of subjectivity took place at the intersection of the social

sciences and cognitive science on both a macro- and a microlevel. On the macrolevel, the attributes of subjectivity are not the monopoly of individual subjects: collective entities can exhibit them as well. On the microlevel, the attributes of subjectivity are not attributes of an alleged subject: they are emergent effects produced by the functioning of subjectless processes. *In both cases the deconstruction of the subject proceeds from a recognition that a complex network of interactions among simple entities-formal neurons in the case of the individual quasisubject, schematic individuals in the case of the collective subject-is capable of exhibiting remarkable properties.* For cognitive scientists who carry on the cybernetic tradition, it is neither more nor less justified to attribute a mental state, such as an intention, to a human being than to a group of human beings.

—Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *The Mechanization of the Mind*

Recently the U.S. Defense Department tested a new micro battle-drone system of hundreds of AI enabled systems controlled by a distributed network intelligence:

The demonstration is one of the first examples of the Pentagon using teams of small, inexpensive, autonomous systems to perform missions once achieved only by large, expensive ones. Roper stressed the department's conception of the future battle network is one where humans will always be in the loop. Machines and the autonomous systems being developed by the DoD, such as the micro-drones, will empower humans to make better decisions faster."

Philip K. Dick a Platonist at heart, once asked: "*Do we collectively dwell in a kind of laser hologram, real creatures in a manufactured quasi-world, a stage set within whose artifacts and creatures a mind moves that is determined to remain unknown?*" Our loss of memory of the ideal world, Dick asserted, this failure to achieve Platonic anamnesis, is the root of our spiritual problem. Lodged in our divinely constructed "subcircuit" (that is, this world), we no longer have the ability to summon our ingrained knowledge of VALIS, the immortal "universe-organism".

In Arthur C. Clarke's famous *Childhood's End* he would have his devilish and impersonal character Karellen tell the story of the *Overmind* and its agenda for planet earth and the human species. Clarke would combine the traditions of Science, Religion, and Mythography to spin a modern secular tale of intelligence beyond human capacity to know or understand. As he would tell the last member of the human species, "There are many things we have had to hide from you, as we hid ourselves for half our stay on Earth."³ These Archons of another order – a secular use of the Gnostic formulae, are a little above the human, but envy the human for its intelligence and ingenuity, too. Yet, humans had gone too far, opened the first lock on Pandora's Box and allowed certain malevolent processes to awaken on Earth.

Robin Hanson once argued that the failure to find any extraterrestrial civilizations in the observable universe implies the possibility something is wrong with one or more of the arguments from various scientific disciplines that the appearance of advanced intelligent life is probable; this observation is conceptualized in terms of a "Great Filter" which acts to reduce the great number of sites where intelligent life might arise to the tiny number of intelligent species with advanced civilizations actually observed (currently just one: human). This probability

threshold, which could lie behind us (in our past) or in front of us (in our future), might work as a barrier to the evolution of intelligent life, or as a high probability of self-destruction. The main counter-intuitive conclusion of this observation is that the easier it was for life to evolve to our stage, the bleaker our future chances probably are.

Clarke's Karellenian species becomes a parable of this Great Filter:

"A century ago we came to your world and saved you from self-destruction. I do not believe that anyone would deny that fact-but what that self destruction was, you never guessed. "Because we banned nuclear weapons and all the other deadly toys you were accumulating in your armories, the danger of physical annihilation was removed. You thought that was the only danger. We wanted you to believe that, but it was never true. The greatest danger that confronted you was of a different character altogether-and it did not concern your race alone.

"During the first half of the twentieth century, a few of your scientists began to investigate these matters. They did not know it, but they were tampering with the lock of Pandora's box. The forces they might have unleashed transcended any perils that the atom could have brought. For the physicists could only have ruined the Earth; the paraphysicists could have spread havoc to the stars. "That could not be allowed. I cannot explain the full nature of the threat you represented. It would not have been a threat to us, and therefore we do not comprehend it. Let us say that you might have become a telepathic cancer, a malignant mentality which in its inevitable dissolution would have poisoned other and greater minds.

"And so we came-we were sent -to Earth. We interrupted your development on every cultural level, but in particular we checked all serious work on paranormal phenomena. I am well aware of the fact that we have also inhibited, by the contrast between our civilizations, all other forms of creative achievement as well. But that was a secondary effect, and it is of no importance.

"We held the clock back, we made you mark time while those powers developed, until they could come flooding out into the channels that were being prepared for them. What we did to improve your planet, to raise your standards of living, to bring justice and peace-those things we should have done in any event, once we were forced to intervene in your affairs. But all that vast transformation diverted you from the truth, and therefore helped to serve our purpose.

"We are your guardians-no more. Often you must have wondered what position my race held in the hierarchy of the universe. As we are above you, so there is something above us, using us for its own purposes. We have never discovered what it is, though we have been its tool for ages and dare not disobey it. Again and again we have received our orders, have gone to some world in the early flower of its civilization, and have guided it along the road that we can never follow-the road that you are travelling now.

"Again and again we have studied the process we have been sent to foster, hoping that we might learn to escape from our own limitations. But we have glimpsed only the vague outlines of the truth. You called us the Overlords, not knowing the irony of that title. Let us say that above us is the Overmind, using us as the potter uses his wheel. "And your race is the clay that is being

shaped on that wheel.

“We believe-it is only a theory-that the Overmind is trying to grow, to extend its powers and its awareness of the universe. By now it must be the sum of many races, and long ago it left the tyranny of matter behind. It is conscious of intelligence, everywhere. When it knew that you were almost ready, it sent us here to do its bidding, to prepare you for the transformation that is now at hand.

“All the earlier changes your race has known took countless ages. But this is a transformation of the mind, not of the body. By the standards of evolution, it will be cataclysmic-instantaneous. It has already begun. You must face this fact; yours is the last generation of Homo sapiens.

“As to the nature of that change, we can tell you very little. We do not know how it is produced-what trigger impulse the Overmind employs when it judges that the time is ripe. All we have discovered is that it starts with a single individual-always a child-and then spreads explosively, like the formation of crystals round the first nucleus in a saturated solution. Adults will not be affected, for their minds are already set in an unalterable mold.

“In a few years, it will all be over, and the human race will have divided in twain. There is no way back, and no future for the world you know. All the hopes and dreams of your race are ended now. You have given birth to your successors, and it is your tragedy that you will never understand them-will never even be able to communicate with their minds. Indeed, they will not possess minds as you know them. They will be a single entity, as you yourselves are the sums of your myriad cells. You will not think them human, and you will be right.

This notion of a disconnection and transformation, a mutant progeny of either robotic or biogenetic systems that will be so disconnected with the human species and its evolutionary history as an organic animal on planet earth is at the heart of this book's conclusion. The notion of an optimized intelligence, a new mode of being, a successor species in the universe will replace humanity.

As Jean Baudrillard comments,

With binary coding and decoding the symbolic dimension of language is lost; the materiality, the multiplicity, and the magic of language are erased. At the extreme limit of computation and the coding and cloning of human thought (artificial intelligence), language as a medium of symbolic exchange becomes a definitively useless function. For the first time in history we face the possibility of a Perfect Crime against language, an aphanisis of the symbolic function. (ibid.)

Yet, for Baudrillard there is still hope, for there is a process of extermination going on even in the disturbance of present human inaction. He describes the extermination of illusion, but not the fantasmagoric illusions and delusions the mind casts:

I don't mean illusion in the pejorative sense, the negative and irrational concept of illusion as fallacy, fantasmagory, and evil—the illusion whose sole destiny is to be rectified. I mean the radical and objective illusion of the world, the radical impossibility of a real presence of things or

beings, their definitive absence from themselves. (Vital Illusion, KL 622)

In fact he will tell us that nothing is identical to itself. We are never identical to ourselves, except, perhaps, in sleep and in death. Language itself never signifies what it means; it always signifies something else, through this very irreducible, ontological absence from itself. The probability, in this world, of a total identification, of a total adequation of the same to the same, is equal to zero. Fortunately. For that would be the Perfect Crime—a crime that never happens. In relations between things there is always a hiatus, a distortion, a rift that precludes any reduction of the same to the same. That is even more true for human beings. We are never exactly present to ourselves, or to others. Thus we are not exactly real for one another, nor are we quite real even to ourselves. And this radical alterity is our best chance—our best chance of attracting and being attracted to others, of seducing and being seduced. Put simply, our chance at life. (Vital Illusion, KL 625-631)

Against the perfect world of Platonic forms and Ideas that are never changing and always the Same ours is a world of non-identical entities whose very inability to be fixed or bound to an essence or substantive mode of being promotes hope and life, change and possibility.

All the energy of life proceeds from this vital alternation of day and night, and more generally, from this vital mediation. Illusion is the general rule of the universe; reality is but an exception. If the same were identical to the same, we would be faced with an absolute reality, with the unconditional truth of things. But absolute truth is the other name for death. (Vital Illusion, KL 638)

For Baudrillard there is a war going on for the future being fought against certain inscrutable and malevolent forces at work from that future in our own time. In fact he tells us that against the forces of the Perfect Crime of a Timeless *world-without-change* we must we must fight for the criminal imperfection of the world. Against this artificial paradise of technicity and virtuality, against the attempt to build a world completely positive, rational, and true, we must save the traces of the illusory world's definitive opacity and mystery. (Vital Illusion, KL 658)

Baudrillard could see on the horizon that the techno-commercial sphere of technics and technology were reversing themselves, and replacing the age-old distinction in categories such as Culture/Nature, etc., that Nature was vanishing into the virtual display systems of our advanced mobile lives replacing natural existence with a total artificial environment. One that was transparent rather than opaque, a virtual world that had like Borges's tale *The Map and Territory* had left only tatters of the natural world in the mapped interstices of the ruins of reality.

Science has got it wrong. It is true that, thanks to the progress of analysis and technique, we actually discover the world in all its complexity—its atoms, particles, molecules, viruses. But never has science postulated, even as science fiction, that things discover us at the same time that we discover them, according to an inexorable reversibility. (Vital Illusion, KL 671)

This notion of things and objects becoming autonomous and independent of our control systems, of machinic life disconnecting from its progenitors and discovering us as an oddity to

be managed and controlled in turn is at the heart of this mutant transformation. Today the artificial wakes up and reacts, determined to keep its secret alive. This duel engaged in by the organic intelligence and the artificial artefacts means the loss of the human subject's hegemonic position: the artefact becomes the horizon of the subject's disappearance. Obviously, this new scenario, this new dramaturgy, is opposed to the classic theory of knowledge. (Vital Illusion, KL 680)

The machinic systems we are bringing forward do not care about the knowledge we are distilling from our observation and analysis of its behavior. Indifferent to every truth, the AGI becomes a sort of sphinx, enigmatic in its hyperconformity, simulating itself as virtuality or reality show. Reality becomes hyperreality—paroxysm and parody all at once. These chameleon like memetic creatures of algorithm, software, and engineering have spawned an artificial evolution that beyond the interpretive strategies of its progenitors.

When we speak of the Death of the Subject, what we're actually admitting to is the replacement and reversal of subject and object. The artificial intelligences are replacing the outmoded systems of organic brains, and replacing the obsolete carbon based systems for newer upgraded silicon systems and titanium frames. We're externalizing the remaining core of the human project: the brain. As Baudrillard would describe it the closer we come, through experimentation, to the object, the more it steals away from us and finally becomes undecidable. And do not ask where it has gone. Simply, the object is what escapes the subject—more we cannot say, since our position is still that of the subject and of rational discourse. (Vital Illusion, KL 708)

Either we think of technology as the exterminator of Being, the exterminator of the secret, of seduction and appearances, or we imagine that technology, by way of an ironic reversibility, might be an immense detour toward the radical illusion of the world. (Vital Illusion, KL 731)

1. Ballard, J.G; Sellars, Simon; O'Hara, Dan. *Extreme Metaphors*
2. Baudrillard, Jean. The Vital Illusion (The Wellek Library Lectures) (Kindle Locations 592-597). Columbia University Press. Kindle Edition. VI
3. Arthur C. Clarke. Childhood's End Ballantine Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

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